

DESERT ON THE ROAD

A MINI-ADVENTURE FOR 4 TO 6 PCs OF 5TH-9TH LEVEL



THE PARTY STUMBLE UPON A strange sight too impossible to ignore: a searing desert in the middle of a temperate climate. Journeying onward they find the great danger this newly barren land poses, encounter enemies, befriend allies, and discover what evil lurks at the edges of the *Desert on the Road*!

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INTRODUCTION

Desert on the Road involves the PCs exploring sandy badlands that have only appeared in the last few weeks, battling dozens of fiery elementals, and preventing the invasion of their world by the salamander armies of the efreet! It is designed to be easily placed into any campaign setting, whether it is used as a surprise sidequest to spice up travel or as a means to further the ongoing plot of the GM's campaign.

BACKGROUND

Aldwyn was a wizard with simple dreams—he wanted power and lots of it. Unfortunately for him he was not a gifted mage and relied on others to increase his store of arcane knowledge. Years of dealing with all manner of creatures and negotiating for their secrets had left him with an eye for a good bargain, and when the Cult of the Inferno came calling he knew exactly what to do.

After a few odd jobs that needed a wizard's touch, Aldwyn received his first gift from the cult: a scroll of *conjure minor elementals*. Normally transcribing a scroll is a delicate, safe process that only comes with a risk of wasting the magic in the scroll. Aldwyn however was just incompetent enough that when he attempted to open his first portal to call through his servants, he instead tore open a hole between the planes, causing a magical explosion that killed him and left the dimensional gate wide open.

For weeks now the Plane of Fire has been invading the area surrounding the mage's tower, transforming it from a verdant forest to a desert more hostile than any other in the Material Plane. As they venture further the adventurers find many

fire elementals throughout, and eventually discover a scouting party of salamanders attempting to see if the new portal can be used as an invasion point for their armies. Luckily for the PCs the azer wizard Tekinel and his entourage have also discovered the dimensional gateway, and working together with the party they can close the portal. If they fail however, the efreet uses the portal to ferry armies into the Material Plane and expand their rule farther than they could have ever dreamed.

OVERVIEW

The PCs discover the desert's edge, and just beyond it the body of a member of the Cult of the Inferno who had attempted to find what had happened to Aldwyn. A letter on the corpse and the trail left behind them show the adventurers where to go, as well as give them further clues as to just how unusual the barren lands are. As they journey through the desert the party finds that due to the Plane of Fire's influence the other three elements—air, water, and earth—are scarce or useless to them, eventually realizing that their only hope for survival is to close the portal as the badlands spread ever further to keep water out of their reach. Once they reach Aldwyn's tower the PCs have to battle their way to the top to help Tekinel close the portal by keeping the salamanders and other elementals streaming through from breaking his concentration. Though it will not be easy, failure is not an option.

CHARACTER HOOKS

As presented below the adventure assumes that the PCs are curious enough to investigate a strange desert and a tantalizing mystery on their own. However if the GM should feel the need to adapt the introduction of *Desert on the Road* for other purposes or play styles, the following character hooks are suggested.

- The sudden appearance of the desert is causing a drought in the surrounding region and the local authorities have contacted the party to ask them to investigate.

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- A **steam mephit** steals a valued possession from the adventurers while they rest. The trail leads towards the center of the desert, and it seems the only way to retrieve it is to venture into the searing heat.
- A merchant caravan tried to venture through the desert a few days ago but hasn't been heard from since. The owner of the caravan wants the PCs to find it, promising them half the gold on the caravan if they return it.

STUMBLING ONTO THE SANDS

Regardless of how the GM chooses to begin the adventure, read the following once the party have neared the desert:

Though the day's journey started overly warm, nothing could have prepared you for this heat—the very air seems to suck moisture from your body with every breath you take and you find yourself squinting, even when you can find shade. Vegetation nearby is wilted and brown, and you can see hints of cracked earth underneath the dying plants. The air grows even hotter as you crest a hill, and down below it you see the dead vegetation suddenly transform into dry, barren earth dusted with a layer of fine sand. Just beyond the border there lay a limp, motionless, cloaked form with a trail of perfectly preserved footprints trailing behind it.

Lying on the ground is Calda, a priestess of the Cult of the Inferno sent to investigate why Aldwyn suddenly stopped communicating. She found the tower at the center of the desert filled to the brim with fire elementals, and tried to escape by going the rest of the way through the arid badlands. Unfortunately as the party are about to find out the supernatural heat is anathema to the other elements and Calda quickly ran out of water, dying from sheer exhaustion at the edge of the desert, and as a result her body looks more mummified than recently dead. The only significant item on her body is a letter she was meant to deliver to Aldwyn. The trail of footprints lead all the way to the mage's tower, so the heroes should be able to locate it easily.

Aldwyn,

Your recent silence has been disappointing, to say the least. We have need of your services again and while you will be appropriately rewarded for your assistance, you will also receive the due reward for ignoring our request. You are expected to return with Calda—any other response will be considered an outright refusal, and we will act appropriately in a swift manner without mercy.

The High Priest

DESERT JOURNEY

Once the adventurers begin making their way into the desert interior, they gradually become aware of just how dangerous this place really is. The tower itself is 12 miles from the edge of the desert and assuming they travel at a normal pace, it takes them 4 hours of travel to reach it.

Dehydration. When they enter the desert, each PC writes down their Constitution score. At the end of each hour, they subtract 1 from that number as they thirst for water and are sapped of all their moisture. For every number below 7, a PC gains a level of exhaustion. These levels of exhaustion are removed when they complete short or long rest while able to access and drink water.

Elementals. The party should be regularly confronted by elementals. When they start the journey and once every hour they are in the open desert, the GM should roll a d20. On a roll of 11 or higher, they run afoul of fiery elementals (see table).

D10	ENCOUNTER
1-2	2d6 magma mephits
3-4	4d4 steam mephits
5-6	2d10 magmins
7-8	1d4 fire elementals
9-10	1 salamander

THE TOWER IN FLAME

Read the following when the PCs have reached Aldwyn's tower:

As you round a barren rock, in the distance you see a pitch black tower wreathed in light. As you get closer however you realize the light is coming from the top of the tower where a harsh crimson resides, spitting out fire elementals every few minutes. Some descend the tower but most simply fly out of the windows of the top floor, cackling as they descend.

At these levels, it is entirely possible that the heroes can simply go straight to the top of the tower without bothering to see its bottom floors. If they do decide to ascend in a more traditional fashion, the GM should use the following room descriptions; otherwise, proceed to the section entitled "Portal Defense".

1. Entrance Hall (Bottom Floor)

Read the following when the adventurers enter this room:

The bottom floor of the tower is made up of several rooms, the largest of which is dominated by a giant glyph burned into its surface. The doors to the other chambers stand open or broken, as if they had been blown inwards away from here. It's difficult to tell what

any of them might have been used for, what with the various elementals still inside burning them to ash.

Scattered throughout the room are **3 steam mephits**, **4 magma mephits**, and **5 magmins**. These creatures are occupied with their fun and ignore the PCs unless provoked. If combat does occur, as soon as they realize how dangerous the party is the creatures left alive flee from the tower.

2. Living Quarters (Second Floor)

If the adventurers do open the doors in this area they have a difficult time telling these were living quarters as most of the contents have been burned to ash. All that remains are coins totaling 4,236 gold, an intricately engraved silver book worth 100 gp, and a *wand of paralysis*.

3. Laboratory (Third Floor)

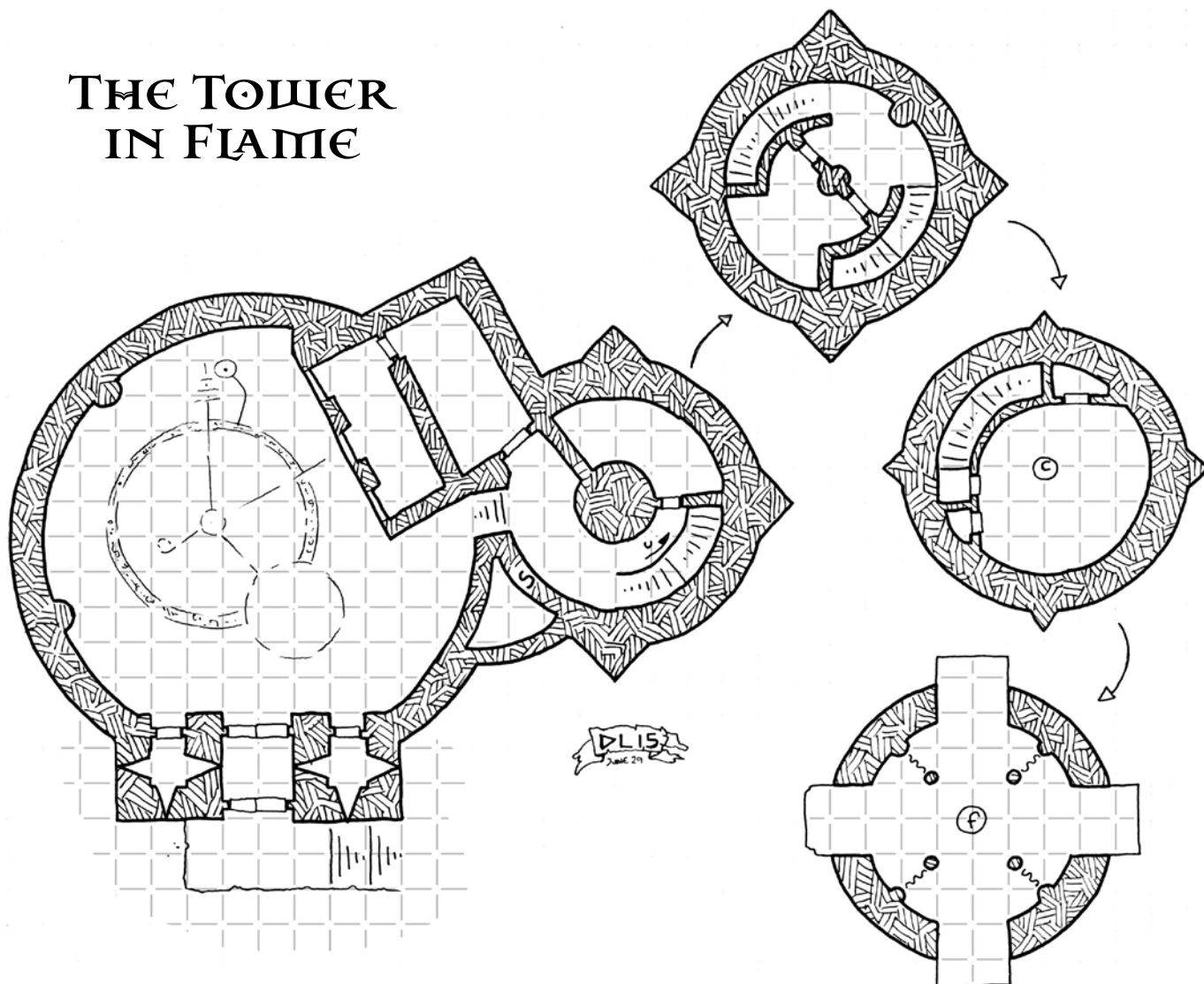
On the other side of the door at the top of the staircase leading to this room, the PCs cross paths with **2 salamanders** desperately trying to run down and away from the sounds of battle clearly ringing down from the ladder in the center of the chamber. They only want to escape to scout the surrounding area, and so it is possible for this encounter to resolve without drawing blood although should they have to, the salamanders will fight fiercely to get past the party.

4. Portal Defense (Roof)

Regardless of how the adventurers get to the top floor of the tower, read the following when they enter:

The top floor of the tower is awash in chaos. At the center of the chamber is a five foot wide, ten foot tall oval portal that leads to a barren wasteland. In the southern area of the room are five dwarf-like creatures with flames instead of hair battling fiercely against two salamanders. The fifth stout, fiery warrior stands behind the other four and casts spells as fast as he can manage, but when he sees you come in he shouts, "Mortals! If you do not wish to see your world enveloped in the tyranny of the efreet, help us!"

THE TOWER IN FLAME



It is certainly in the party's best interest to help the azer mage. Tekinel (the wizard in question) quickly explains the situation as best he can once the current battle has died down--salamander scouts are regularly making their way through the portal, the only thing preventing them from streaming through a jagged boulder that makes it hard to get to. Tekinel can close the portal by casting *private sanctum*, but doing so takes 10 full minutes and his entourage needs help defending him.

If the PCs agree to help, the next phase takes 100 rounds although not all of them should be played out. Instead the GM should send another elemental through the portal every 1d10 rounds, with a 50% chance the elemental is a salamander (other elementals have no interest in this conflict). GMs

that do not wish to roll that often can simply choose to explain that other elementals stream through regularly, and then add another salamander to the combat every 10 turns. If the first few salamanders are dispatched with ease, smaller dice can be used to determine the number of rounds that pass or increase the chances of a salamander getting through the portal, doing their best to avoid there being more than 4 salamanders at any given time.

This battle should be difficult and harrowing, but smart and resourceful adventurers should come out victorious! Tekinel and the survivors among his entourage finish sealing the portal as they return to the Plane of Fire, and over the next several weeks the region gradually returns to its temperate state. 🐸